

The Almost- Elephant



A collection of poems by Kate Naylor

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Helen of Troy

A face far too beautiful to launch heavy, dirty ships,
yours would launch a thousand gorgeous butterflies.

The Almost-elephant

They wandered at a leisurely pace across the veldt,
pregnant ladies bringing up the rear,
slow and clumsy with humidity.

When the storm hit they ran for shelter,
the unexpected violence confusing their senses,
rumbling in terror, mashing plants and earth underfoot.

Most of the family made it.
But the elephant fetus lay with its mother,
blackened by lightning,
tiny, half formed, incomplete.
A potential elephant,
an almost-elephant
curled tight in the ozone-fragrant dust like a sad little grey fist.

Bus trance

She settles into a window seat and drifts off,
completely contented.

The bus mutters, mumbles, groans.
There's a subdued buzz of conversation.
Pneumatic doors hiss.
Little eddies of air flow through the space, moving hair.
She's warm and safe, pleasantly bored.
Someone turns the page of a newspaper behind.
There's nothing to do except close her eyes,
or read a book
or stare blankly at the unfolding townscape.

She vibrates gently with the engine,
suspended in time and place,
somewhere between on and off,
caught in public transport amber,
neither leaving,
nor arriving,
neither here nor there,
lost in a bus trance.

Seasons

Silent winter garden, eloquent, waiting,
Asleep within the snow; low, cold, iced, blind,
with spring near-distance,
breathless and lovely,
coiled in the curl of the sweet, white rime.

Luscious spring garden, vibrant, bursting,
Striding lithe and emerald as the birds shout loud,
with summer in its pocket,
windless and scorching,
somnolent and turgid in the green-sapped vine.

Dazzling summer garden, dazed and dozing,
humming with bees; vivid, verdant, tall, proud,
with autumn in the wings,
crisp and fruitful,
high wind and bluster as the skies scud cloud.

Capricious autumn garden, raggedly weary,
shedding colour fast; wind, rain, fog, shine,
with winter on the doorstep,
frigid and cruel,
hard and unforgiving as the sap declines.

The glorious sheep years

If someone suggested,
ten years ago,
she'd get a kick out of hearing sheep calling on the Downs
from her garden
she'd have denied it with every ounce of energy at her urban fingertips.

Nature?
When there are clubs to go to?
Are you mad?

Now she sits absorbing the warm, loose calls of contented sheep
and the sparkling waterfall shriek of skylarks
as they blow on the fragrant, chalky breeze
straight off the rounded hills of Sussex
into her home.

Entering her Glorious Sheep Years,
she never imagined it'd feel so right
to shed youth like last year's fashion,
and head for the high ground of age, where the view's bright and clear
and the sounds are true.

Dedicated to Jaamit, who will never reach his glorious sheep years.

Shaken and stirred

The daughter, travelling to visit the mother
shrinks with every mile,
shedding age and experience until,
on arrival,
she's about twelve.

Back home she's clear and cool,
whole and rounded, breathing grown up air.
Yes, she feels the insistent, warm, elastic thrum of family.
But it's distant.

In their presence the cords are stronger.
Tight, powerful, encompassing love.
Intense and enwrapping,
love's high and neap tides appeal and repel.

As the daughter travels back the ties stretch painfully.
Home again she feels separate but intertwined,
comforted yet uncomfortable,
safe but for no good reason, scenting terrible danger...
in short, thoroughly shaken and stirred.

Afterwards they tug faintly for days,
silken threads of the heart
resonating thin and silvery down the train line.

Squirrel costume

Dreading the question,
“if you were an animal, what animal would you be?”
she decided to wear a squirrel costume to the job interview
rather than attempt to explain -
in simple yet insightful terms,
from a blue sky perspective,
taking a helicopter view,
thinking outside the box,
to a panel of corporate types,
the true value of squirrelness (squirreliity?)
in a business context.

Lumpen teenager

The lumpen teenager heaves himself off the settee,
heading for a lard-on-toast snack.

Cut him in half and it'd say 'bored' right through the middle,
like Brighton rock.

Dave

Dave's a squirmer, a squiggler, an otter-cat.
He's a lover and a leaver,
a cat burglar,
sneaking through the window,
ravishing us in the night with meaty kisses
then leaving us bereft,
lying lonely but for puffs of fine black fur.

Dave's a hunter, a killer, a loner,
He's a disappearer,
making for the hills with nothing but his sleek coat,
long legs and savage claws to sustain him,
bringing home fine gifts of rabbit guts,
frog spleens
and crispy little bird feet.

Dave's a charmer, a roue, a good old boy,
He's sinuous and klutzy,
knocking valuables off shelves with his snaky tail
then beaming with huge and unselfconscious pleasure,
as we sit bemused amid the Dave-created chaos,
feeling loved and happily taken advantage of.

Mr Mizon

Mr Mizon storms across the stage waving his arms
“*Can you feel the passion?*” he roars.
He brandishes his stick and I imagine him toppling,
unbalanced by his giant wooden leg.
But he stays upright and paces front-of-stage,
glowering through massive eyebrows
as we sit cross legged, bemused in the hot assembly hall.

“*What animal do you imagine when I play THIS?*” he shouts,
dropping the heavy arm of the school record player onto another LP.
Tall, brown, woolly music flows from the tinny mono speaker...
and I see a bear. A bear!

“*And THIS?*”

The big, furry notes tone down into delicate airy flutters as the bear
disappears into the distance and I see...
a butterfly!

I remember Mr Mizon desperate to instill beauty into six year olds
as we sat on the warm, honey coloured parquet floor, fidgeting, aching
for playground action.

But Jonty remembers Mr Mizon’s grace
as the big slipper whooshed through the air
to land with a crack on his soft, frightened infant flesh.

Rooks in the big chill

The rooks wait for the lights to change, looking right, then left, then right again as snowflakes fall on their glossy blue-black backs and cars crawl past shovelling slush tsunamis to and fro.

When the green man flashes the rooks stroll over the iced Zebra crossing in a gang, grinning, then turn around and do it again as tired drivers, exhausts thrumming steam, watch and smile.

The rooks high up on the street lights wait for fast cars then dive into the vortex, whirling up the road caught in the chill slipstream flurry, cawing raucously, hurtling, chopping the air into chunks and tatters at forty miles an hour.

Game over, the rooks in the tree grip frozen branches stolidly, facing north into the gale with beaks clenched and feathers fluffed up fat against the big chill, cawing as the watery sun sets and the glassy pavements freeze.

Old Molly

Old Molly curls into a neat C shape, snuffles her nose into her tail, sighs hugely and relaxes into feathery cat sleep.

She twitches, dreaming of sunshine. Of spreading her fat, furry belly on sun-warmed, springy grass, idly sniffing scorched, dusty summer smells.

Of batting buzzing insects, patting butterflies and circling carefully to create shady dens in emerald-cool vegetation.

Of lounging alert on warmed brick walls at dusk, chattering at bold birds and scanning bats as they flit across her line of vision.

Of late night explorations into foreign territories, where regimented veg marches and the mulched night-time earth is ripe for digging.

Of hunting small, squeaky creatures in crisp, silver moonlight then padding home serenaded by the dawn chorus.

Little spark

So delicate a breeze would blow her away, thistledown,
little Alice creaks down the garden steps,
gnarly claws clicking the concrete.

“Alice, Alice, Alice” I whispered to her twenty years ago,
when she was six weeks old,
small enough to fit in the palm of my hand.
By the time we got home, she knew her name.

Little bright face, dear little thing, little spark of life,
skipping towards me with a big, wide cat-grin,
sneaking under the duvet to warm chilly, leathery little morning feet on
the small of my back,
purring like a drill,
killing string,
dancing across the keyboard, once - unbelievably - typing ‘fuck’ into my
document,
now a very old cat lady,
still smiling in the sunshine.

My mum

My mum flits through history on light feet,
in silvery shoes.

She dances like the music comes from inside.

Farts

“Farting is fun with bandages on”,
smiled Johnny the terminally sore.

“They seep through the cracks and help me relax.
I think I’ll get injured some more.”

Dreams

Sliding down gentle shingle into turquoise waters,
unable to climb out: it's suddenly a cliff.

Hiding from the Germans with Resistance fighters,
shopped by children with Hitler grins.

Walking under vast sets of dessicated crab legs,
picking up enormous, opalescent shells.

Boogying the boulevard in '70s New York,
I'm a black man in purple loons with a huge afro.

Clutching gemstones, knowing I'm dreaming,
willing them to be there when I open my eyes.

Vast fish-shadows lurk in deep, still waters,
skinny bridges sway with the breeze.

There's a gnome on the miniature station platform,
baring pointy teeth as toy trains clatter by.

Watching from high as the waves surge closer,
knowing we should move but pity-horror paralysed.

Wandering summer in the flower-drift garden,
bloom scented air with my love close by.

500 quid dog

Oh, I wish I'd offered the bloody man £500 for his dog.

Tired, dusty, outsized puppy feet slapping the hard, hot, dry pavement and not a drink in sight... except in his pissed owner's hand.

I'd have loved him, given him a feather-soft bed, stroked his sleek baby fur rather than shouting at him to hurry while he did his exhausted doggy best to keep up.